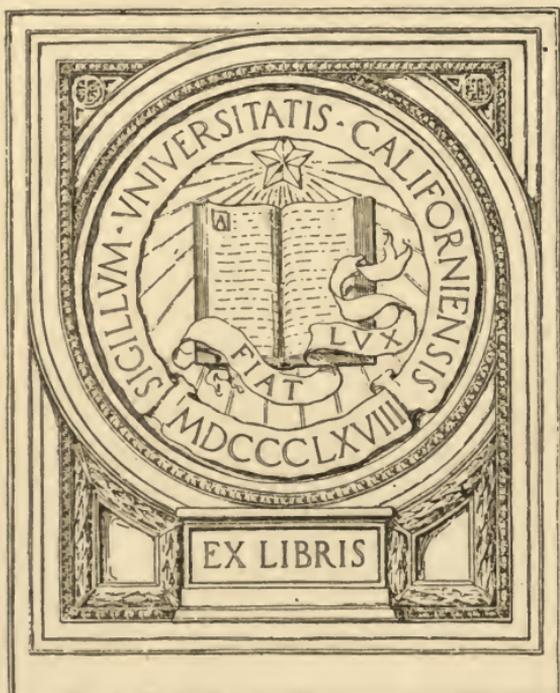


MID-AMERICAN
CHANTS



SHERWOOD ANDERSON

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MID-AMERICAN CHANTS

BY SHERWOOD ANDERSON

AUTHOR OF "MARCHING MEN," "WINDY MCPHERSON'S SON," ETC.

UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA

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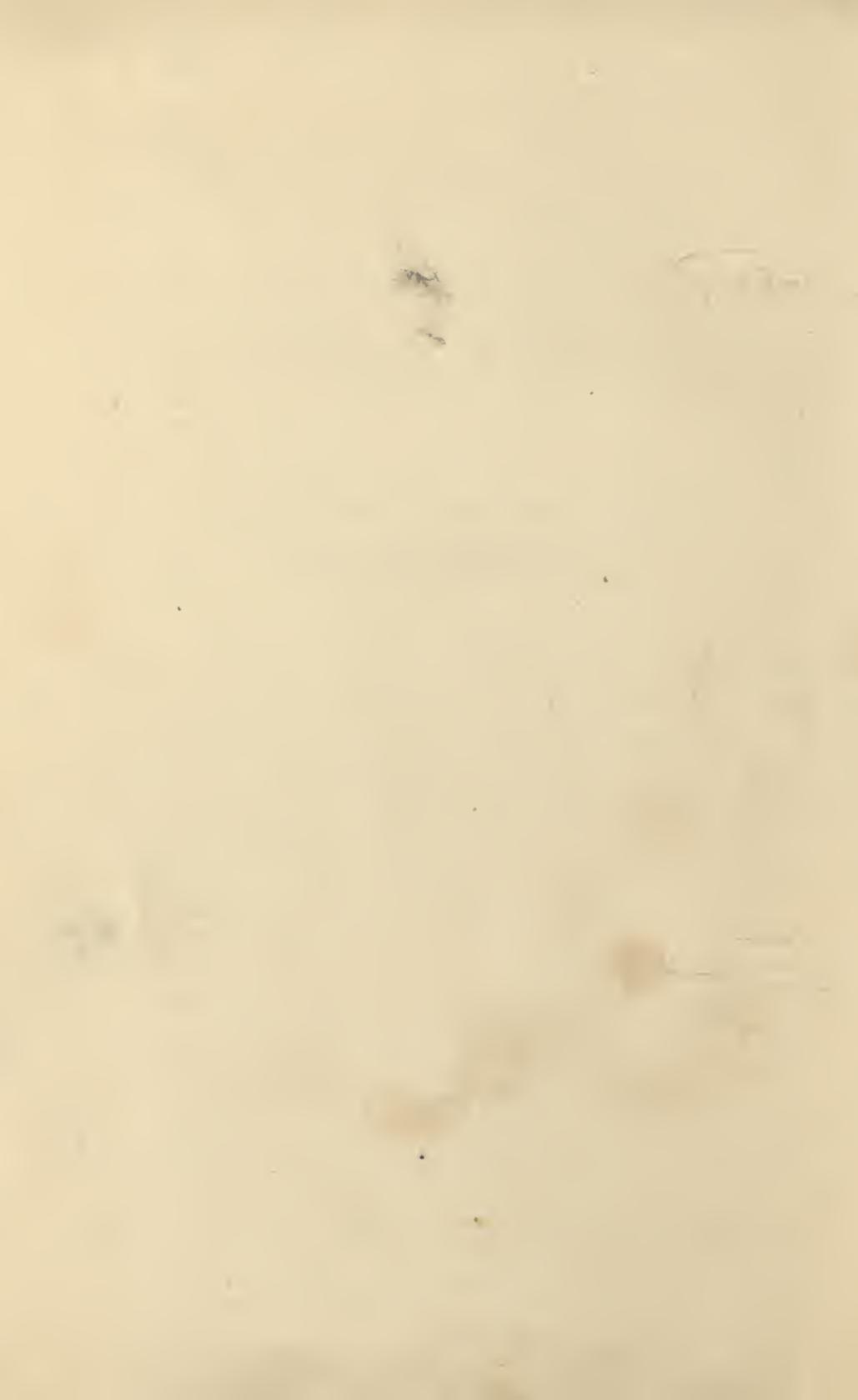
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TO
MARION MARGARET ANDERSON

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

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FOREWORD

I do not believe that we people of mid-western America, immersed as we are in affairs, hurried and harried through life by the terrible engine—industrialism—have come to the time of song. To me it seems that song belongs with and has its birth in the memory of older things than we know. In the beaten paths of life, when many generations of men have walked the streets of a city or wandered at night in the hills of an old land, the singer arises.

The singer is neither young nor old but within him always there is something that is very old. The flavor of many lives lived and of many gone weary to the end of life creeps into his voice. Words run out beyond the power of words. There is unworldly beauty in the song of him who sings out of the souls of peoples of old times and places but that beauty does not yet belong to us.

In Middle America men are awakening. Like awkward and untrained boys we begin to turn toward maturity and with our awakening we hunger for song. But in our towns and fields there are few memory haunted places. Here we stand in roaring city streets, on steaming coal heaps, in the shadow of factories from which come only the grinding roar of machines. We do not sing but mutter in the darkness. Our lips are cracked with dust and

with the heat of furnaces. We but mutter and feel our way toward the promise of song.

For this book of chants I ask only that it be allowed to stand stark against the background of my own place and generation. Honest Americans will not demand beauty that is not yet native to our cities and fields. In secret a million men and women are trying, as I have tried here, to express the hunger within and I have dared to put these chants forth only because I hope and believe they may find an answering and clearer call in the hearts of other Mid-Americans.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON.

Chicago, February, 1918.

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THE CORNFIELDS

I am pregnant with song. My body aches but do not betray me. I will sing songs and hide them away. I will tear them into bits and throw them in the street. The streets of my city are full of dark holes. I will hide my songs in the holes of the streets.

In the darkness of the night I awoke and the bands that bind me were broken. I was determined to bring old things into the land of the new. A sacred vessel I found and ran with it into the fields, into the long fields where the corn rustles.

All of the people of my time were bound with chains. They had forgotten the long fields and the standing corn. They had forgotten the west winds.

Into the cities my people had gathered. They had become dizzy with words. Words had choked them. They could not breathe.

On my knees I crawled before my people. I debased myself. The excretions of their bodies I took for my food. Into the ground I went and my body died. I emerged in the corn, in the long cornfields. My head arose and was touched by the west wind. The light of old things, of beautiful old things, awoke in me. In the cornfields the sacred vessel is set up.

I will renew in my people the worship of gods. I will set up for a king before them. A king shall arise before my

people. The sacred vessel shall be filled with the sweet oil of the corn.

The flesh of my body is become good. With your white teeth you may bite me. My arm that was withered has become strong. In the quiet night streets of my city old things are awake.

I awoke and the bands that bind me were broken. I was determined to bring love into the hearts of my people. The sacred vessel was put into my hands and I ran with it into the fields. In the long cornfields the sacred vessel is set up.

CHICAGO

I am mature, a man child, in America, in the West, in the great valley of the Mississippi. My head arises above the cornfields. I stand up among the new corn.

I am a child, a confused child in a confused world. There are no clothes made that fit me. The minds of men cannot clothe me. Great projects arise within me. I have a brain and it is cunning and shrewd.

I want leisure to become beautiful, but there is no leisure. Men should bathe me with prayers and with weeping, but there are no men.

Now—from now—from to-day I shall do deeds of fiery meaning. Songs shall arise in my throat and hurt me.

I am a little thing, a tiny little thing on the vast prairies. I know nothing. My mouth is dirty. I cannot tell what I want. My feet are sunk in the black swampy land, but I am a lover. I love life. In the end love shall save me.

The days are long—it rains—it snows. I am an old man. I am sweeping the ground where my grave shall be.

Look upon me, my beloved, my lover who does not come. I am raw and bleeding, a new thing in a new world. I run swiftly o'er bare fields. Listen—there is the sound of the tramping of many feet. Life is dying in me. I am old and palsied. I am just at the beginning of my life.

Do you not see that I am old, O my beloved? Do you not understand that I cannot sing, that my songs choke me? Do you not see that I am so young I cannot find the word in the confusion of words?

SONG OF INDUSTRIAL AMERICA

They tell themselves so many little lies, my beloved. Now wait, little one—we can't sing. We are standing in a crowd, by a bridge, in the West. Hear the voices—turn around—let's go home—I am tired. They tell themselves so many little lies.

You remember in the night we arose. We were young. There was smoke in the passage and you laughed. Was it good—that black smoke? Look away to the streams and the lake. We're alive. See my hand—how it trembles on the rail.

Here is song, here in America, here now, in our time. Now wait—I'll go to the train. I'll not swing off into tunes. I'm all right—I just want to talk.

You watch my hand on the rail of this bridge. I press down. The blood goes down—there. That steadies me—it makes me all right.

Now here's how it's going to come—the song, I mean. I've watched things, men and faces—I know.

First there are the broken things—myself and the others. I don't mind that—I'm gone—shot to pieces. I'm part of the scheme—I'm the broken end of a song myself. We are all that, here in the West, here in Chicago. Tongues clatter against teeth. There's nothing but shrill screams and a rattle. That had to be—it's a part of the scheme.

Souls, dry souls, rattle around.
Winter of song. Winter of song.

Now, faint little voices do lift up. They are swept away in the void—that's true enough. It had to be so from the very first. Pshaw—I'm steady enough—let me alone. Keokuk, Tennessee, Michigan, Chicago, Kalamazoo—don't the names in this country make you fairly drunk? We'll stand by this brown stream for hours. I'll not be swept away. Watch my hand—how steady it is. To catch this song and sing it would do much—make much clear.

Come close to me warm little thing. It is night—I am cold. When I was a boy in my village here in the West, I always knew all the old men. How sweet they were—quite Biblical too—makers of wagons and harness and plows—sailors and soldiers and pioneers. We got Walt and Abraham out of that lot.

Then a change came.

Drifting along. Drifting along.
Winter of song. Winter of song.

You know my city—Chicago triumphant—factories and marts and the roar of machines—horrible, terrible, ugly and brutal.

It crushed things down and down. Nobody wanted to hurt. They didn't want to hurt me or you. They were caught themselves. I know the old men here—millionaires. I've

always known old men all my life. I'm old myself. You would never guess how old I am.

Can a singer arise and sing in this smoke and grime? Can he keep his throat clear? Can his courage survive?

I'll tell you what it is—now you be still. To Hell with you. I'm an old empty barrel floating in the stream—that's what I am. You stand away. I've come to life. My arms lift up—I begin to swim.

Hell and damnation—turn me loose. The floods come on. That isn't the roar of the trains at all. It's the flood—the terrible, horrible flood turned loose.

*Winter of song. Winter of song.
Carried along. Carried along.*

Now in the midst of the broken waters of my civilization rhythm begins. Clear above the flood I raise my ringing voice. In the disorder and darkness of the night, in the wind and the washing waves, I shout to my brothers—lost in the flood.

Little faint beginnings of things—old things dead—sweet old things—a life lived in Chicago—in the West—in the whirl of industrial America.

God knows you might have become something else—just like me. You might have made soft little tunes—written cynical little ditties, eh? Why the devil didn't you make some money and own an automobile?

Do you believe—now listen—I do. Say, you—now listen—do you believe the hand of God reached down to me in the flood? I do. 'Twas like a streak of fire along my back. That's a lie, of course. The face of God looked down at me, over the rim of the world.

Don't you see we are all a part of something, here in the West? We're trying to break through. I'm a song myself, the broken end of a song myself.

We have to sing, you see, here in the darkness. All men have to sing—poor broken things. We have to sing here in the darkness in the roaring flood. We have to find each other. Have you courage to-night for a song? Lift your voices. Come.

SONG OF CEDRIC THE SILENT

Songs come to my lips every hour. I shall hurl my songs down the winds of the world. Like a blow, a kiss, a caress, my songs shall come.

Like a guest I am come into the house, the terrible house. So gentle and quiet I come they do not know me. The son of Irwin and Emma I am, here in America, come into a kingship.

I would destroy and build up. I would set up new kings. The impatience has gone out of me. Hatred and evil I have put far away.

Do you remember when you crept close to me, wanting to touch my body? What a night—how it rained.

How could you know, how could you know in me there was oblivion?

The terrible poison of my body has laid waste the land. I embrace Hell for you, go to my damnation for my love of you.

Into the land of my fathers, from Huron to Keokuk, beauty shall come—out of the black ground, out of the deep black ground.

Squaw man, red man, old and decrepit, into the mighty wheels of the engine I hurl these songs.

Twenty weeks I lay on the bleak hillside, waiting for you.
When you came and spoke how I trembled. Down the
lane, through the woods to the meadows you ran. Then
I knew.

Broad long fields. Wheat that stands up.

Cedric, the son of Irwin and Emma, stand up. Give your
life, give your soul to America now. Cedric, be strong.

SONG OF THE BREAK OF DAY.

I am tired and very old—just the muscles of my arms still
alive.

Cunning little muscles, betraying, not caring how very old
and tired I am.

Did you think, O my beloved, I was young? Did my
laughing face and laughing eyes tell you lies?

In Chicago many faces, drifting, perplexing, confusing, de-
stroying, betraying, confounding.

Now stop—little love warm and still—try to think.

Nod your head. Sway! Wait! Try to believe.

Stronger, deeper, stronger—good arms, sweep them forth—
over the land—wide—wide—over the land—break—
break—come to life.

Ninety, a thousand, a million, a nation. Corn in long fields
and slender young wheat. See my young strength how
it grows. I am casting you forth.

Buried away in the mines in the hills—strong arm, long
arm. Gripping the gold and the ashes of ages. Did you
think I was old and too tired to find love?

Love,
I awake.

SONG OF THE BEGINNING OF COURAGE

I am come with infinite slowness into my kingship. At night I lay down by the window. The little flat bands that bind my body were tense. I am the first to come into the new kingship.

By the long aisles of the corn you must go, little brothers, narrow and long the way. The corn in its struggle whispers and sways. Courage—always new courage.

In—deeper in—far from the stars—let the wide soft corn leaves whisper to you.

Crush and trample, brother, brother—crush and trample 'til you die.

Do not hold thy hand from strangling—crush and trample 'til you die.

Back of the corn—back of the corn—bold and free my kingdoms lie.

Ninety men upon the bridges ninety swift hawks in the sky.

I am come to the face of the gods through the cornfields.

Back to the womb of my mother I go.

Ache—ache—ache and behold me. Lay thy hot hands on my thigh.

Crush and trample, brother, brother—crush and trample 'til you die.

Do not hold thy hand from strangling—crush and trample 'til you die.

REVOLT

Bring hither the beams of the corncribs, my children. The dung heaps are burned. Strong hands have gripped the rope whereby the horses were tied. The fish nets of the Northwest and the sheep gates of Michigan are opened to me.

I have put my neck and my hands to the work, O my children. How black your eyes have become. They gleam in the darkness. The souls of Ulysses and of Abraham have been opened to me. By the coal heaps near the factory door my men are assembled.

Tipping the water-gates of the rivers the night riders assemble. In the cities the grey little foxes lie low. By the howling of dogs in the silence the decay of men is proclaimed.

Long nights we were weeping the prelude, my brothers. The madness and washing of hands has been done. The sweetness of apples—the fatness of cornfields—the whoring of men for strange gods is begun.

A LULLABY.

I am become one with you. I am old. I am tired.

Watch my hands how they slip. One by one the fingers
let go.

Into my house comes my enemy bold. His beard sweeps
the floor. He is old. He is hatred and lust.

Soft creeps the night in the passages old—creeping along—
creeping along. Soft creeps the wind in the old standing
corn.

Into my body my enemy comes. Watch my fingers let go—
slow—oh, so slow.

SONG OF THEODORE

O my beloved—men and women—I come into your presence. It is night and I am alone and I come to you. I open the window of my room so that you may come in. I am a lover and I would touch you with the fingers of my hands. In my eyes a fire burns. The strength of my imaginings is beyond words to record. I see the loveliness in you that is hidden away. I take something from you. See, I embrace you. I take you in my arms and I run away!

I am alone in my room at night and in me is the spirit of the old priests. What cunning fingers I have. They make intricate designs on the white paper. See, the designs are words and sentences. I am not a priest but a lover, a new kind of lover, one who is of the flesh and not of the flesh. My cunning fingers are of the flesh. They are like me and I would make love always, to all people—men and women—here—in Chicago—in America—everywhere—always—forever—while my life lasts.

I am afraid. Do you not understand, O my beloved, that I am afraid? In me is the old inheritance. The fires that burn have not burned me. I have not suffered enough.

Now, my beloved, I am not pure and I dare not come to you. I run away and hide. I am a priest and my head is not shaven. I sit in my room and my doors are bolted. I tremble and am afraid.

It is then that you come to me, O my beloved. Men and women you crowd in upon me. Through the walls and the bolted doors you come crowding, hurrying. I was afraid and trembled, but I have become unafraid.

I cannot tell how many things there are that I understand. I understand all, everything. The words of the men and women who have come in to me are without meaning, but the air of my room has brought health to me.

I was determined to withdraw from the world, to be a priest with a shaven head. In fancy I saw myself go into the forest, into the dense silence. For days I lay like a stone in the midst of the silence.

My body was bathed in a cold stream. Again and again my body was bathed. The cold water ran over my body and chilled the warm blood that runs beneath the surface of the skin.

The inside of my body was made clean. My body was fed on the white meat of nuts that fell from the trees. I crunched the nuts with my white teeth. How powerful my body had become.

In the rain in the streets of my city I stood. My clothes were foul. In the woven cloth that covered my body the dust of my city had lodged. The dust of my civilization was in my soul. I was a murderer—a weeping prostitute

standing by a wall. I was a strong man with strong arms. In a jail they had lodged me. I was one condemned to be hanged. There was filth on my shoes—my shoes were filthy.

It was night and I had come into my room. I was cold and my body trembled. I was afraid. The pencil was gripped in my cunning fingers. Words came. Over the paper my pencil ran—making the words—saying the words.

There is a song in the pencil that is held in my cunning fingers. Out—out—out—dear words. The words have saved me. There is rhythm in the pencil. It sings and swings. It sings a great song. It is singing the song of my life. It is bringing life in to me, into my close place.

Out—out—out—out of the room I go. I am become pure. To the homes of the people I go. Here in these words I am become a man. The passions and lusts of men have taken hold of me.

I have gone into the woman's chamber, into the secret places of all women and all men I have gone. I have made love to them. Before me in the chamber lies the naked body of a woman. She is strong and young.

Do you not see, O my beloved, that I am become strong to caress the woman! I caress all men and all women. I make myself naked. I am unafraid. I am a pure thing. I bind and heal. By the running of the pencil

over the white paper I have made myself pure. I have made myself whole. I am unafraid. The song of the pencil has done it.

What cunning fingers I have. They make intricate designs on the white paper. My cunning fingers are of the flesh. They are like me and I would make love always—to all people—men and women—here—in Chicago—in America—everywhere—always—forever—while my life lasts.

MANHATTAN

From the place of the cornfields I went into the new places.

I went into the city. How men laughed and put their hands into mine.

To a high place overlooking the city I climbed. Men came running to me. On the stairways there was the endless threshing of numberless feet. The faces of women appeared. The soft lips of women were on my hands and my sinewy arms. Understanding came in to me.

I am of the West, the long West of the sunsets. I am of the deep fields where the corn grows. The sweat of apples is in me. I am the beginning of things and the end of things.

To me there came men whose hands were withered. My soldiers were small and their eyes were sunken. In them was the pain that sobs, the great pain that sobs. The sobbing of pain was like the threshing of feet on the stairways that went up from the city.

In the morning I arose from my bed and was healed. To the cornfields I went laughing and singing. The men who are old have entered into me. As I stood on the high place above the city they kissed me. The caress of those who are weary has come into the cornfields.

SPRING SONG

In the forest, amid old trees and wet dead leaves, a shrine.
Men on the wet leaves kneeling.
The spirit of God in the air above a shrine.

Now, America, you press your lips to mine,
Feel on your lips the throbbing of my blood.
Christ, come to life and life calling,
Sweet and strong.

Spring. God in the air above old fields.
Farmers marking fields for the planting of the corn.
Fields marked for corn to stand in long straight aisles.

In the spring I press your body down on wet cold new-
plowed ground.
Men, give your souls to me.
I would have my sacred way with you.

In the forest, amid old trees and wet dead leaves, a shrine.
Men rising from the kneeling place to sing.
Everywhere in the fields now the orderly planting of corn.

INDUSTRIALISM

In the long house of hate,
In the long hours,
In the never-ending day;
Over the fields—her black hair flying—
My mistress
Terrible
Gigantic
Gaunt and drear.

I've got to die—you've got to die.
We do not fancy your thin hands,
That reach and reach into the vase
Where old things rust.
Death to you—
Now.
Thin dream of beauty,
You be gone.

Our fathers in the village streets
Had flowing beards and they believed.
I saw them run into the night—
Crushed.
Old knowledge and all old beliefs
By your hand killed—
My mistress
Grim.

Awake and shake thy dusty locks.
Come, drive the soldiers to their toil.
A million men my mistress needs,

To kiss
And kill
For her desire,
To-night—
Arise.

Out of the vase the long thin hand,
To grip the sword that men forget
My mistress waits beside the mill
To kiss the sword
Of Christ
Or you,
Who dare
For her.

SALVO

Thin rift in time,
A wedge of time, forever driven deep 'twixt days and nights,
A moment only—all winds suspended and all day-dreams
stopped,
The clock upon the wall a dreary lie,
Then death to that and me.

By a chair a woman and a pair of eyes—eyes luminous and
sure.

No word spoken.
Love leaping, whispering, clamoring, crying,
Love making time halt and creating me.

Now my old city sees me pick my burden up.
All sweet dreams fade.
Words, musical and dear, will ne'er be spoken now.
I follow plows that mark my furrows through the world.

Now you watch me, brothers,
Men and boys and new-made wives.
Hear with glowing wonder the story of my ways.
The burden from my back I pass to you.
I go my way, unburdened and alone.

Out of the West and East men came to look at me.
Eyes gleamed in darkness and the world was pure.
Grown old by wondrous looks and dreaming out of time
I pass and do not come to life again.

THE PLANTING

'Tis then I am the tiny thing,
A little bug, a figure wondrous small, a sower on prairies
limitless.

Into her arms I creep and wait and dream that I may serve,
And do the work of gods in that vast place.

Awake—asleep—remade to serve,
I stretch my arms and lie—intense—expectant—'til her
moment comes.

Then seeds leap forth.

The mighty hills rise up and gods and tiny things like me
proclaim their joy.

Man in the making—seeds in the ground,
O'er all my western country now a wind.
Rich, milky smell of cornfields, dancing nymphs,
And tiny men that turn away to dream.

SONG OF THE MIDDLE WORLD

I want falling light and an evening sky,
I want to sing my songs low crooning to the moon.
I want men silent and the creeping grace of old gods in their
 hearts.

I want night, soft darkness and damp smells
When my songs sing.

From the Allegheny Mountains where the mine fires flare,
To the low hills of Nebraska where my farmers dwell,
Let my songs sweep forth.
Let gods listen and let men stand up.
Let my songs sing.

Great cradle-land of giants where my cornfields lie,
Let me cradle my men,
Let me cradle my men.
Let the factories close and the voices die.
Let me sing now.

I have been to the Dakotas when the fields were plowed.
I have stood by the Ohio when the dawn broke forth.
Promise of corn,
Promise of corn,
Long aisles running into the dawn and beyond
To the throne of gods.

I want falling light and an evening sky,
I want to sing my songs low crooning to the moon.
I want to bring gods home to sweating men in corn-rows and
 in shops
When my songs sing.

THE STRANGER

Her eyes are like the seeds of melons. Her breasts are thin and she walks awkwardly. I am in love with her.

With her I have adventured into a new love. In all the world there is no such love as I have for her.

I took hold of her shoulder and walked beside her. We went out of the city into the fields. By the still road we went and it was night. We were long alone together.

The bones of her shoulder are thin. The sharp bone of her shoulder has left a mark on my hand.

I am come up into the wind like a ship. Her thin hand is laid hold of me. My land where the corn nods has become my land.

I am come up into the wind like a ship and the thin hand of woman is laid hold of me.

SONG OF THE LOVE OF WOMEN

Have you nothing to offer but bread and your bodies—
Women, my women?
Long nights I have lain by you, sleepless and thinking—
Sisters, my sisters.

In the doorway of the warehouse a tiny twisted body.
Hark, the night is long. Let us talk. One! Two! Three!
One! Two! Three! March! March away!

Come to me, sisters, come home to the cornfields—
Long have I ached for you, body and brain.
Have you nothing to offer but bread and your bodies—
How long must I wait for you, sisters, in vain?

SONG OF STEPHEN THE WESTERNER

I am of the West—out of the land—out of the velvety creeping and straining. I have resolved. I have been born like a wind. I came sweating and steaming out of the cornrows.

Deep in the corn I lay—ages and ages—folded and broken—old and benumbed. My mother the black ground suckled me. When I was strong I builded a house facing the east. The hair on my arm was like the long grass by the edge of the forests.

Behold, I am one who has been building a house and driving nails with stones that break. The hammer of song has been given me. I am one with the old gods—an American from Dakota—from the deep valley of the Mississippi—from Illinois—from Iowa—from Ohio.

Would you know what has befallen?

In my warm ignorance I lay dead in the corn-rows. On the wind came rumors and cries. I squirmed and writhed. I was frightened and wept. My fathers emerged from the corn and killed each other in battle.

I am a man come into the city of men out of the mouth of the long house. Hear the wind in the caves of the hills! My strength is terrible. I stand in the streets and shout. My children are as the dust of city streets for numbers. I am so small men do not see me. So tiny am I that I walk on the ball of your eye.

Saddle a horse—sweep away.
Saddle a horse for liberty.
Harry my men—harry my men.
Broken ground for mine and me.

In the long house at evening the old things were sweet. The nuts and the raisins lay deep on the tables. The women cut white bread with long knives. They hid the sweets of their bodies with clothes. They knew old things but had forgotten old singers.

On the straw in the stables sat Enid the maker of harness. Beside him sat old men. Long we lay listening and listening. On their haunches they sat and talked of old gods. Above the sound of the tramping of the hoofs of the horses arose always the voices of old men.

Now, my beloved, I have fallen down from my horse. I have returned to kill my beloved on the threshing floor. My throat is sore with the dust of new cities. The voices of new men shake the drums of my ears. I await long in the darkness the sweet voice of old things, but the new death has put its hand into mine. I have killed my beloved in the place of the deep straw and cast her away.

Saddle a horse—sweep away.
Break-neck speed to liberty.
Harry my men—harry my men.
Broken ground for mine and me.

I am of the West—out of the land—out of the velvety creeping and straining. It is day and I stand raw and

new by the coal-heaps. I go into the place of darkness at the beginning of the new house. I shall build my house with great hammers. New song is tearing the cords of my throat. I am become a man covered with dust. I have kissed the black hands of new brothers and cannot return to bury my beloved at the door of the long house.

SONG TO THE LOST ONES

Soft thy feet on the floor of the desert,
In the night—
Running—
Desperate and breathless.

Blood on the sands of the desert drying,
Drops of blood on the hot sand drying,
Blood from the veins of my beloved
Pouring out on the desert.

Soft in the night the rustle of corn leaves
Young men into the cities pouring,
Blood from the veins of young men pouring into the cities.

FORGOTTEN SONG

Always at the kitchen door the gaunt wolf stands.
Grey wolf—old wolf—evil and old—
Keep ever thy hungry gleaming eyes,
Thy fangs to kill,
Thy heart of hate.
Now my brother infallible, stay in the darkness there.

Long, long ago, when days were new,
Fresh born of cornfields, undefiled,
Man fought the wolf in open fight,
Under the moon
They fought at night,
Into his body the wolf-love, won in the darkness there.

There is a tale men cannot tell,
Tired women telling,
Tired men telling,
Echoes of tales through the halls of souls,
Telling of ghosts by kitchen doors, dim in the darkness
there.

Grey wolf lying in the snow,
Lie low,
Lie low.
Soft lips clinging in the night,
God's challenge to all in the bitter night, low in the dark-
ness there.

Far in men's minds the cry of wolves,
Old primal things and snow-clad hills,

In many hearts a challenge grim.
Run with me,
My lady fair,
Run with my wolf to-night.

Always at the kitchen door the cold white face
And cold white teeth of want and woe.
Run forever, lady fair,
Track the grey wolf to his lair—
A challenge to you in the bitter night, loud in the darkness
there.

Always by the kitchen door the gaunt wolf stands.
Grey wolf—old wolf—evil and old—
Keep ever thy hungry gleaming eyes,
Thy fangs to kill,
Thy heart of hate.
Now my brother magnificent, stay in the darkness there.

AMERICAN SPRING SONG

In the spring, when winds blew and farmers were plowing
fields,

It came into my mind to be glad because of my brutality.

Along a street I went and over a bridge.

I went through many streets in my city and over many
bridges.

Men and women I struck with my fists and my hands began
to bleed.

Under a bridge I crawled and stood trembling with joy
At the river's edge.

Because it was spring and soft sunlight came through the
cracks of the bridge

I tried to understand myself.

Out of the mud at the river's edge I moulded myself a god,
A grotesque little god with a twisted face,
A god for myself and my men.

You see now, brother, how it was.

I was a man with clothes made by a Jewish tailor,
Cunningly wrought clothes, made for a nameless one.

I wore a white collar and some one had given me a jeweled
pin

To wear at my throat.
That amused and hurt me too.

No one knew that I knelt in the mud beneath the bridge
In the city of Chicago.

You see I am whispering my secret to you.

I want you to believe in my insanity and to understand
that I love God—

That's what I want.

And then, you see, it was spring
And soft sunlight came through the cracks of the bridge.

I had been long alone in a strange place where no gods came.

Creep, men, and kiss the twisted face of my mud god.

I'll not hit you with my bleeding fists.

I'm a twisted god myself.

It is spring and love has come to me—
Love has come to me and to my men.

THE BEAM

Eighteen men stood by me in my fall—long men—strong men—see the oil on their boots.

I was a guest in the house of my people. Through the years I clung, taking hold of their hands in the darkness. It rained and the roar of machines was incessant. Into the house of my people quiet would not come.

Eighteen men stood by me in my fall. Through their breasts bars were driven. With wailing and with weeping I ran back and forth. Then I died. Out of the door of the house of my people I ran. But the eighteen men stood by me in my fall.

SONG TO NEW SONG

Over my city Chicago a singer arises to sing.
I greet thee, hoarse and terrible singer, half man, half bird,
strong, winged one.
I see you float in cold bleak winds,
Your wings burned by the fires of furnaces,
In all your cries so little that is beautiful,
Only the fact that you have risen out of the din and roar to
float and wait and point the way to song.

Back of your grim city, singer, the long flat fields.
Corn that stands up in orderly rows, full of purpose.
As you float and wait, uttering your hoarse cries
I see new beauties in the standing corn,
And dream of singers yet to come,
When you and your rude kind, choked by the fury of your
furnaces,
Have fallen dead upon this coal heap here.

Kneeling in prayer I shall forget you not, grim singer,
Black bird, black against your black smoke-laden sky,
Uttering your hoarse and terrible cries,
The while you do strive to catch and understand
The faint and long forgotten quality of song,
By never sweeter singers to be sung.

SONG FOR DARK NIGHTS

His Imperial Majesty the Moon!

Sweep down, O moon, past wind-swept towns and cultivated fields,
Past me and all my men that yearn and strive toward gods.

Lying in deep grass my throat hurts and my body aches.

I am with child to dreams.

Cities new-built and all the squirming, changing hoards of men

Press down on me.

They press me deep into the ground.

In the air above my head men wriggle into life,

The male milk in my breast begins to stir,

Into my body out of many prairies wide

Come roots of thought.

Since gods and peoples stood defying time,

Since men, like little dogs, have bayed the moon,

Since hard-limbed stags have raced into the dawn,

I have been here, time serving for my gods.

In the deep ground roots and seeds,

In my breast seeds growing.

I'll not flame to life and cry for joy.

My spirit breathes its story of decay.

THE LOVER

All night she walked and dreamed on the frozen road,
She the insane one, feeling not thinking.
All night she walked and wanted to kill,
Wanted to love and kill.

What did she want?
Nobody knew.
None of us knew why she wanted
To kill.

We were the heavy ones, heavy and sure.
The wind in the cornfields moved us not.
We the Americans, worthy and sure,
Worthy and sure of ourselves.

Tom killed his brother on Wednesday night,
Back of the corncrib, under the hill.
Then she ran to him, sobbing and calling,
She who had loved and could not kill.

NIGHT WHISPERS

Just midnight quiet and a sundered cloud,—mother I live—
Aching and waiting to work my way through.

You of the long and the gaunt—silent and grim you stood.
Terribly sweet the touch of your hand—mother, reach down.

Grey the walls and long the waiting—grey the age dust on
the floor.

If they whip and beat us, little mother, need we care?

SONG TO THE SAP

In my breast the sap of spring,
In my brain grey winter, bleak and hard,
Through my whole being, surging strong and sure,
The call of gods,
The forward push of mystery and of life.

Men, sweaty men, who walk on frozen roads,
Or stand and listen by the factory door,
Look up, men!
Stand hard!
On winds the gods sweep down.

In denser shadows by the factory walls,
In my old cornfields, broken where the cattle roam,
The shadow of the face of God falls down.

From all of Mid-America a prayer,
To newer, braver gods, to dawns and days,
To truth and cleaner, braver life we come.
Lift up a song,
My sweaty men,
Lift up a song.

RHYTHMS

Sing low my soul—
To tear and bite
Is but the madness of the beast.
Blow on thy wrath,
Burst not thy bands,
Be quiet,
Wait until thy moment comes.

Sweet in their meaning break the allied winds.
Now all the tiny muscles play the tune.
Man, strike to kill,
Rise now to sing,
Now throw the shaft against the wall of time.

Deep in my old valley lies the naked man.
He is a seed,
Seeds sleep in him.
My man shall be the father of a tribe, a race.
He is the world and all the world has been asleep in him.

UNBORN

Swift across the night a little cry,
Against the cold white night a stain of red.
The moon dips down,
The dull winds blow.
My unborn son is dead.

NIGHT

Night.

We creep through darkness 'neath a rotten wall

Weighing a million tons.

In the darkness, silence and a woman's cry.

Black night,

The longest, blackest, night of all our lives.

Dear France—

Put out your hand to us.

A VISIT

Westward the field of the cloth of gold.
It is fall—see the gold in the dust of the fields.

Lay the golden cloth upon me. It is night and I come
through the streets to your window.

The dust and the words are all gone, brushed away. Let
me sleep.

CHANT TO DAWN IN A FACTORY TOWN

In the ground,
Below the great buildings,
Below the running of waters and the threshing of feet—
Deep—
Buried away—
Long forgotten,
The spirits of strong men.

I hail thee, O love!

In the soft night I have touched the bodies of men,
I have touched with rough fingers the lips of women,
I have become with child to all men,
I, master of life, embrace all men.

I hail thee, O love!

Now, my beloved, the time has come to bury you in the
black ground at the field's edge.

I am glad.

In my breast gladness is singing.

Now the great engines roar and thrust out.

The unconquerable one goes through the ground to my
desire.

In the long night,

In the long day,

Below and above,

New song, come to life.

Behold!

Song is consuming the terrible engine of life.

I greet thee, O love.

In the fields
Seeds on the air floating.
In the towns
Black smoke for a shroud.
In my breast
Understanding awake.

In my breast the growth of ages,
In my breast the growth of ages,
At the field's edge,
By the town's edge,
In my breast the growth of ages.

My beloved,
White, like the lips of the dead Christ,
Far below,
In the black ground,

I hail thee, O love!
I hail thee, O love!

In my breast the growth of ages.
In my breast the growth of ages.

SONG OF THE MATING TIME

Out of the cornfields at daybreak,
Ready to run through the dawn to the place of beginning,
Creeping, I come, out of the corn,
Wet with the juice of bruised corn leaves—out of the corn
I come.

Eager to kiss the fingers of queens,
Eager to stand with kings,
To breed my kind and stand with kings.

Out of the corn at daybreak,
Brother to dogs,
Big brother to creeping, crawling things,
Stretched full length on the long wet grass at the edge of
the cornfields,
Waiting,
Here I lie through the day, waiting and waiting.

Come, tired little sister, run with me.
See—I kiss your lips—soft—to entice you.
In the still young night we begin our running,
Stripping our clothes away.

Skirting the towns, passing the lonely houses,
Staying away from the sleeping cities,
Running forever—on and on—into the empire of the corn.

Come, tired little sister, run with me.
Do you know my brother, the farmer?
Now he grows discouraged and weeps.

I saw him kneeling and praying alone, by a destroyed wheat
field.

It was the time of learning for me.

I fairly choked.

It was the beginning of faith in the gods for me.

Up now, little short-winded sister thing,

I'll make love to you after awhile.

Save your strength.

Let's be running.

Let's be running.

See the trains in the long flat fields at night,

The screaming trains—yellow and black.

In and out of the land they go—

Yellow and black—screaming and shrieking.

Come, tired little sister, run with me.

Let's lie down on this hill-side here.

Let our soft mid-western nights creep into you.

See the little things, creeping, creeping,

Hear, in the night, the little things creeping.

Let's be creeping.

Let's be creeping.

I've got a strong man's love for you.

See the muscles of my legs—how tense.

Now I leap and cry like a strong young stallion.

Let's away.

West of Chicago the endless cornfields.

Let's be running.

Come away.

SONG FOR LONELY ROADS

Now let us understand each other, love,
Long time ago I crept off home,
To my own gods I went.

The tale is old,
It has been told
By many men in many lands.
The lands belong to those who tell.
Now surely that is clear.

After the plow had westward swept,
The gods bestowed the corn to stand.
Long, long it stood,
Strong, strong it grew,
To make a forest for new song.

Deep in the corn the bargain hard
Youth with the gods drove home.
The gods remember,
Youth forgets.
Doubt not the soul of song that waits.

The singer dies,
The singer lives,
The gods wait in the corn,
The soul of song is in the land.
Lift up your lips to that.

SONG LONG AFTER

Was that all you could do, Woman—loving and giving?

You went pretty far—I admire you for that. Do you remember the night in the upper room when he cried? He needed you then—God knows he needed you then.

Down below the others were waiting—Judas and Peter and John—old men—mighty wise. He was crucified for them. At night when the stars came he went out alone—long after that.

How did you know what you did know, Woman? That puzzles me.

How could you go that far and stop?

Was that all you could do, Woman—loving and giving?

SONG OF THE SOUL OF CHICAGO

On the bridges, on the bridges—swooping and rising, whirling and circling—back to the bridges, always the bridges.

I'll talk forever—I'm damned if I'll sing. Don't you see that mine is not a singing people? We're just a lot of muddy things caught up by the stream. You can't fool us. Don't we know ourselves?

Here we are, out here in Chicago. You think we're not humble? You're a liar. We are like the sewerage of our town, swept up stream by a kind of mechanical triumph—that's what we are.

On the bridges, on the bridges—wagons and motors, horses and men—not flying, just tearing along and swearing.

By God we'll love each other or die trying. We'll get to understanding too. In some grim way our own song shall work through.

We'll stay down in the muddy depths of our stream—we will. There can't any poet come out here and sit on the shaky rail of our ugly bridges and sing us into paradise.

We're finding out—that's what I want to say. We'll get at our own thing out here or die for it. We're going down, numberless thousands of us, into ugly oblivion. We know that.

But say, bards, you keep off our bridges. Keep out of our dreams, dreamers. We want to give this democracy thing they talk so big about a whirl. We want to see if we are any good out here, we Americans from all over hell. That's what we want.

SONG OF THE DRUNKEN BUSINESS MAN

Don't try, little one, to keep hold of me,
Go home! There's a place for you by the fire.
Age is waiting to welcome you there.
Go home and sit by the fire.

Into the naked street I ran,
Roaring and bellowing like a cow,
Shaking the walls of the houses down,
Proclaiming my dream of black desire.

If there's a thing in this world that's good it's guts.
I'm a blackbird hovering over the land.
Go on home! Let me alone.

Do you know, little dove, I admire your lips—
They're so red.
What are you doing out in the street?
Take my arm! Look at me!

Ah, you be gone. I'm sixty-five years old to-night.
Now what's the use of beginning again?

SONG TO THE LAUGH

All night we lay in the cold and the rain in the midst of the
laughter,
The laughter of weaklings,
The laughter of women,
The laughter of those who were strong.

At the end of the lane we lay, beyond the roar and the
rattle.

Hark! In the silence the laughter!

Strong men creeping,
Old men creeping,
Old men and children, creeping and creeping—
Far away in the darkness.

Edward, my son,
Thomas, my man,
Why do you creep all night in the darkness?
Why do you creep and wait to strike at night in the dark-
ness?

Nine! Ten! Twelve!
Nine! Ten! Twelve!

Take the knife from the shield and strike in the darkness.
Strike, man! Strike!

All night we lay in the cold and wet at the edge of the
darkness.

Trembling with fear we prepared to welcome the knife
thrust.

Then we kissed and our bodies caressed.

We prepared, my beloved, to add our voices to those of the
others.

In the cold and wet we crept and laughed in the darkness.

HOSANNA

The cornfields shall be the mothers of men. They are rich with the milk that shall suckle men. The bearded men shall arise. They shall come sturdy and strong out of the West.

You may prick the new men with spears. Their blood shall run out on the snow but they are my men and shall survive.

I am a child and I weep. My hands are red and cold. I run along and blow upon them.

In me is the blood of the strong men. A little I have endured and shall endure. I am of the blood of strong bearded men. The milk of the corn is in me.

Sweet, sweet, the thought of the new men. I am cold and run through the streets of Chicago. I blow upon my red hands. Sweet, sweet the thought of the new men.

WAR

Long lanes of fire, dead cornstalks burning,
Run now—head downward—plunging and crying,
Hold hard the breath now,
Forward we run.

Out of Nebraska, on into Kansas, now the word runs,
Runs with the wind, runs with the news of war, crying and
 screaming.
Now the word runs.

Out on low ridges, black 'gainst the night sky;
Farmer boys running, factory boys running;
Boys from Ohio
And my Illinois.

Questions and answers, over the land,
Questions that hurt, answers that hurt,
Questions of courage
That cannot but hurt.

Deep in the cornfields the gods come to life,
Gods that have waited, gods that we knew not.
Gods come to life
In America now.

MID-AMERICAN PRAYER

I sang there—I dreamed there—I was suckled face downward in the black earth of my western cornland.

I remember as though it were yesterday how I first began to stand up.

All about me the corn—in the night the fields mysterious and vast—voices of Indians—names remembered—murmurings of winds—the secret mutterings of my own young boyhood and manhood.

The men and women among whom I lived destroyed my ability to pray. The sons of New Englanders, who brought books and smart sayings into our Mid-America, destroyed the faith in me that came out of the ground.

But in my own way I crept out beyond that. I did pray—in the night by a strip of broken rail fence—in the rain—walking alone in meadows—in the hundred secret places that youth knows I tried to find the way to gods. Now you see how confusing life is.

There were my cornfields that I loved—what whisperings there—what daring dreams—what deep hopes—what memories of true old savages, Indians striving toward gods, dancing and fighting and praying while they said big words—medicine words.

And all this in the long cornfields.

And then in the fall the crackling of cornleaves, the smells, sights and sounds.

The corn stood up like armies in the shocks.

When I was a boy I went into the cornfields at night. I said words I had not dared to say to people, defying the

New Englanders' gods, trying to find honest, mid-western American gods.

And all the time the fields spread west and west. An empire was building.

Towns grew up, factories multiplied.

You see the corn had come into its own but that destroyed too.

I and my men stood up but we grew fat. We lived in houses in cities and we forgot the fields and the praying—the lurking sounds, sights, smells of old things.

Now I am ashamed and many of my men are ashamed.

I cannot tell how deep my shame lies.

I walk in the streets seeing my own well-clad body and my fat hands with shame.

I am thinking of lean men fighting in many places over the world. I am thinking of the voices of my own gods forgotten in the fields.

And now at last after my long fatness I begin to get the old whisperings.

I go along here in Chicago praying and saying words. Not the shouting and the waving of flags but something else creeps into me.

You see, dear brothers of the world, I dream of new and more subtle loves for me and my men.

My mind leaps forward and I think of the time when our hands, no longer fat, may touch even the lean dear hands of France, when we also have suffered and got back to prayer.

Conceive if you will the mightiness of that dream, that these fields and places, out here west of Pittsburgh, may be-

come sacred places, that because of this terrible thing, of which we may now become a part, there is hope of hardness and leanness—that we may get to lives of which we may be unashamed.

Above the old half-lost shadows, that lurk over our cornfields, now something more than Indians that dance in the moonlight.

Now older, older things—bearded Slavs dreaming far back, stout Englishmen marching under Cromwell, Franks and Celts, presently Scandinavians too.

These to our cornfields, the old dreams and prayers and thoughts of these men sweetening our broad land and getting even into our shops and into the shadows that lurk by our factory doors.

It is the time of the opening of doors.

No talk now of what we can do for the old world.

Talk and dream now of what the old world can bring to us—the true sense of real suffering out of which may come the sweeter brotherhood.

God, lead us to the fields now. Suns for us and rains for us and a prayer for every growing thing.

May our fields become our sacred places.

May we have courage to choke with our man's hate him who would profit by the suffering of the world.

May we strip ourself clean and go hungry that after this terrible storm has passed our sacred fields may feed German, Jew and Japanese.

May the sound of enmity die in the groaning of growing things in our fields.

May we get to gods and the greater brotherhood through
growth springing out of the destruction of men.
For all of Mid-America the greater prayer and the birth of
humbleness.

WE ENTER IN

Now you see, brothers, here in the West, here's how it is—
We stand and fall, we hesitate—
It is all new to us,
To kill, to take a fellow's life.
Uh!—a nauseous fever takes the light away.

Now we stand up and enter in.
The baseness of the deed we too embrace.
We go in dumbly—into that dark place.
The germ of death we take into our veins.

Do we not know that we ourselves have failed?
Our valleys wide, our long green fields
We have bestrewn with our own dead.
In shop and mart we have befouled our souls.
Our corn is withered and our faces black
With smoke of hate.

We make the gesture and we go to die.
Had we been true to our own land our sweetness then had
quite remade the world.
We now are true to failure grim—
We go in prayer to die.

To our own souls we take the killer's sin.
Into the waters black our souls we fling.
We take the chances of the broader dream.
Not ours but all the worlds—our fields.
We enter in.

DIRGE OF WAR

It begins with little creeping pains that run across the breast.
Good-bye, brother. I see your arm is withered and your
lusts are dead. I did not think the end would come so
soon. It has—good-bye.

In the night we remembered to believe in hell. Wide we
threw the window to behold the fog. Men stumbled in
the darkness—a cry arose—then came war.

Now, brother—let's ponder—say we draw apart. Woman
come to fatherhood and the world upset. My little
naked soldiers are playing on the floor. I strike and bid
you go. If you go, all is gone.

There is a thing you must do—let's get back to that.
You must strike out alone, get out of this room. You
must go upon your journey. Don't stay here—now be
gone—good-bye.

The gray and purple lesson of the night comes on. What
we dare not face must now come home to us. Hear the
guns—dull—in the night.

Back of us our fathers—let that go. Don't confuse us
here—alone—with memories that can't stand—and run
—in our night. I'll tell you what I want—be still.

I want to creep and creep and lie face downward on the rim
of hell. I want your breathing body to be torn from me.
I want hell and guns to be stilled by the aching thrust of

new things into life. I want death perfect and new love achieved. I want much.

Believe it or not I actually did run in the dusty hallways of my own life before this began. I went into the long empty halls, breathed the stale dust of all old things.

I knew and yet I did not know. That's what I want to say—by song and by the jarring note of song that cannot sing.

I was coming with America—dreaming with America—hoping with America—then war came.

I'm an aching old thing and the dream come true. I am sick with my last sickness here alone. I am creeping, creeping, creeping—in the night—in the halls. I am death—I am war—I am hate.

And that's all, brother. I dare not hope. The childishness has left me. I am dead. Over the fields a shriek—a cry. I pay my fare to hell—I die—I die.

LITTLE SONG TO A WESTERN STATESMAN

Well, I'm for you, little worm,
Coming to the surface of the ground on warm, wet days,
Digging deep down when it is dry and cold—
Who elected you to serve in the United States Senate, eh?

Say, you are funny in that black frock coat,
Funny as me, with my fat cheeks and brown woven coat too.
Where'd we get our clothes?
Who made them for us?

You must get serious, now and then,
In the night when it is dark and wild winds blow.
I do. I weep and pray and have big thoughts.
That's what makes life seem so strange and unbelievable
to me.
You understand, eh?

SONG OF THE BUG

Now I sing to you the song of my kind that you do not
understand,
I, the tiny thing, swift dancing on a beam of light.
A fillip for your understanding!

On I go in my own way doing my own work,
Biting the tender legs of other little bugs,
Spraying my spermatozoa on the warm ovaries of female
bugs,
Undermining the walls of tall man-made towers.

There is a certain dignity in my life if you could but under-
stand it,
You great bug that keep thinking such almighty thoughts,
Hark to the little song of my kind.
It would be well for you if you could understand that.

ASSURANCE

I have heard gods whispering in the corn and wind;
In my crude times when thoughts leaped forth,
Conquering, destroying, serving steel and iron,
I have run back to gods, to prayers and dreams.
I have dreamed much and have remembered dreams.

Now in this room, a face stands forth,
A narrow face, with many shadows hid 'twixt brow and
chin.
The face half turns,
It tells its tale to me,
Now down the drumming way of time it goes and leaves me
shaken here.

Now woman and tall man,
My little brother who has passed my way,
Bestow a kiss on me.
Turn quick thy face, let what is old grow new.
Strike in the darkness at the horrid lie.
Laugh now and pass along.

I remember you forever for a moment's love.
I pass to you the message in the long relay.
Are you brave—do you dare—will you try?
See, I take the death that came into the room to you.

A face remembered, a desire forgot,
A word caught drifting in the long detour,

A caress to you, a swift hail to you.
Forget—remember—dare to cling to me.
Now wait you in the darkness
Till the moment comes.

REMINISCENT SONG

Now you are dear to me,
Now my beloved.
You are the one that I did not take.
Even then,
When my body was young,
When the sweetness of you made me drunk,
You are the one that I did not take.

All that is old came into me,
That night by the bush and the stairs in the dark.
Yours were the lips I did not kiss,
Yours the love that I kept.

Long and long I have walked alone,
Past the cornfields and over the bridge,
Sucking the sweetness out of nights,
Dreaming things that have made me old
And young,
Since that night.

Faring away down a lonely road
Now you must go, my beloved,
Thinking your thoughts in the bitter nights,
You that I loved and did not take.

EVENING SONG

Back of Chicago the open fields—were you ever there?
Trains coming toward you out of the West—
Streaks of light on the long grey plains?—many a song—
Aching to sing.

I've got a grey and ragged brother in my breast—
That's a fact.

Back of Chicago the open fields—were you ever there?
Trains going from you into the West—
Clouds of dust on the long grey plains.
Long trains go West, too—in the silence
Always the song—
Waiting to sing.

THE
LIBRARY OF
CALIFORNIA

SONG OF THE SINGER

Drunken and staggering—
Saying all profane things—
Kissing your hands to the gods—
In the night praying and whimpering—
Aching to sing and not singing—
You—
My brother.

Beating upon it with fists—
Trying to shake it off—
Hoping and dreaming you will emerge—
My sister.

I wrap my arms about you that hunger.
In the long hair of my breast there is warmth.
I look far into the future beyond the noise and the clatter.
I will not be crushed by the iron machine.

Sing.
Dare to sing.
Kiss the mouth of song with your lips.
In the morning and in the evening
Trust to the terrible strength of indomitable song.

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